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Media Practice in Twenty-first Century India

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Speculations by the home minister and the police on the hidden hand behind the Dalit protests made more headlines than the incident itself. The photographs echoed this perspective: a brilliant page one picture of a golden statue of Buddha looking on at the flames of the violence remains in mind. Shouldn't the pictures of the Bhotmanges' bodies been on page one? Even while the protests were on, there was no detailed interview with Dalit intellectuals, protestors, or leaders, except to get their response to the allegations by policemen.

ANDHRA JYOTHY'S CASTEIST OFFENCE?⁷

Sourced from C.S.H.N. MURTHY and other reports
Friday, 27 June 2008

On 24 June, the Hyderabad police arrested the Editor of *Andhra Jyothy*, K. Srinivas, and two reporters. The arrests came after a prolonged discussion with the police in the newspaper office on the validity of the arrests. The police maintained that legal opinion had confirmed that there was a prima facie case against the three journalists. A blank editorial appeared the next day on the newspaper's editorial page with a notice pasted on it: 'How to write an editorial with hand-cuffs'. The three were detained under the SCs and Scheduled Tribes (STs) (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

The provocation for these arrests stemmed from the fact that on 26 May, *Andhra Jyothy* published a story, entitled 'Hired Leaders', in an apparent reference to the leaders of Madiga Reservation Porata Samithi (MRPS) headed by Manda Krishna Madiga. Though the article did not make any insinuations about the Madiga caste per se (one of the sub-castes under the SC categories), the article purportedly referred to some of the recent agitations of MRPS leaders as 'hired agitations' and described the leaders as 'hired leaders'. The article also castigated the main leaders of MRPS for being stooges of CM Y.S. Rajsheshkar Reddy, launching agitations apparently at his behest.

The MRPS leaders are demanding division of SC into A, B, C, and D categories. Their main allegation was that most of the SC posts were cornered by a single SC community, namely, Mala, which is predominant among SCs in Andhra Pradesh (AP). Though there are ministers hailing from both the Mala and Madiga communities in the state

cabinet, Manda Krishna Madiga's demand for categorization of SCs is based on an equitable approach to all the categories and subcategories of SC communities.

In keeping with the demand of MRPS leaders, the Congress state government appealed to the centre to appoint an inquiry commission to look into the demands of MRPS leaders. Accordingly, the central government appointed the Usha Mehra Commission which, after conducting a protracted enquiry with a number of sittings across the state concerning the status of all subcategories of SCs in the state, recently submitted its recommendations to the prime minister (PM).⁸ However, the rival Mala community, its ministers, and leaders, opposed the Usha Mehra Commission on the basis of the judgement of the *Supreme Court* that such categorization of SCs is anathema to the spirit of reservations.⁹

Over the past four years, MRPS leaders have been on frequent hunger strikes, and each time the government would send its ministers and community leaders to cajole the MRPS leadership with some assurances. It had become a familiar routine for both sides.

As soon as the article appeared in *Andhra Jyothy*, the MRPS leaders, under the leadership of Madiga, attacked the newspaper office located in Banjara Hills. They tried to attack its Managing Director, Vemuri Radha Krishna, but in the process, several scribes were injured. They broke the furniture, windows, and other infrastructure in the newspaper office while raising slogans against the management and *Andhra Jyothy*.

The entire media was stunned at this attack on the newspaper and the subsequent vandalism. They burnt an effigy of Krishna right in front of *Andhra Jyothy* office. On the complaints lodged by the management of the newspaper, the Jubilee Hill Police registered cases of vandalism, destruction of property, and trespass against the MRPS leaders, including Madiga. Though the chief minister condemned the attack in principle, he also criticized the write-up in *Andhra Jyothy* as irresponsible journalism. Whereas media organizations condemned the attack in one voice, the intellectuals and academia conducted a conference immediately at the Press Club and requested the leaders of MRPS to desist from such attacks. They appealed to Madiga to air his condemnation of such write-ups in a democratic way. In the course of the protests against the violent attack, an effigy of Madiga was burnt.

The leaders of MRPS proclaimed that the write-up was an offence against the SCs. They filed cases against the management and its reporters for burning the effigy and threatened the chief minister that if he did not order the arrest of these members under SCs and STs (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, they would launch a state-wide agitation. It looked initially that the CM had not taken the warning seriously but soon, MRPS leaders met Home Minister Jana Reddy and Director General of Police (DGP) Yadav and a month after the alleged offence three journalists were arrested.

The editor was considered as prime accused for he was found, in one of the photos taken at that time, to be slapping the effigy of Madiga before it was set ablaze. After initial resistance, the editor surrendered and was sent to police custody till 8 July 2008. When media organizations throughout the state began to protest, the CM conducted a review meeting. The police officials assured the CM that the arrests were very much within the ambit of law.